

Op-ed Worst Case Planning Thinking the Unthinkable

**Eric E. Holdeman, Director
King County Office of Emergency Management**

I have not felt like this since I saw the World Trade Center towers collapsing on September 11, 2001. It is the images of the devastation brought about by Hurricane Katrina that summons up the feelings of, "How can this be happening?"

As an emergency manager I believe in "Worst Case" planning. The idea is to imagine a scenario, typically that is centered on a single type of hazard, and then to paint in words the worst possible picture of what we might be faced with.

Too many times when I've done this procedure I've been faced with the skeptics who will say things like, "That's too far fetched!" "How could anyone deal with that? We need something more realistic."

But, the wisdom of doing "Worst Case" planning is being borne out, even as I write these words, in the Southern States that have been impacted by Hurricane Katrina. 80% of New Orleans, a major metropolitan city, is estimated to be under water, forcing the "long term" dislocation of tens of thousands of residents.

What about the worst case disasters for our Central Puget Sound? Number one is a Seattle Fault Earthquake. Imagine over a twenty foot vertical displacement of the ground. That's right, 20 feet! One segment of earth dropping or going up in the air, all in one fell swoop. This can happen from Kitsap County, across the Puget Sound (creating a local Tsunami that runs North and South), taking out perhaps both the football and baseball stadiums, I-5, I-90 bridges, I-405 and following I-90 out into Issaquah.

In geological history, Mt. Rainier has had lahars (mud flows) go all the way up the Kent – Auburn Valley floors, up the Duammish River, and empty into what is now Elliot Bay. Imagine mud covering Hwy 167 and taking out all the storage and manufacturing facilities extending up into Renton, and Boeing Field. Would Boeing stay and rebuild, or will they relocate their manufacturing to another part of the United States? Watch what other businesses do in the Southern states.

And, let's not forget Pandemic Flu. A "Neutron Bomb" like disaster that impacts only people and our economy, and not buildings and critical infrastructure.

While there has been a four year emphasis from the Department of Homeland Security on terrorism in all its varieties, chemical, biological, nuclear, radiological, and explosive, there has come with that attention an abandonment of a balanced approach to what is called “all-hazards” disaster preparedness. Here in King County we recognize that terrorism is a possibility, and a hazard that we must plan for. But I can guarantee you that we will have another major natural disaster in your lifetime. After all, we have had 20 Presidential Disaster Declarations in the last 40 years.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) which previously had the role of assisting state and local authorities with all facets of disaster preparedness and response has slowly atrophied as functions and missions have been stripped from it by the Department of Homeland Security, its own parent department.

Today, if I was to invite FEMA to come and join us in doing worst case planning I would be told that they no longer have a disaster preparedness role. They now are only to respond to and recover from disasters. And, there is no organization in this region that represents the Department of Homeland Security with whom we can do such planning.

Yes, improvements have been made in our overall disaster preparedness due to the influx of Homeland Security funding. But like you and your personal financial investing, you don’t want to put all your funds or efforts into a single category of stocks, or in disaster terms, a single hazard like terrorism.

We have seen the financial failures brought about by not having a diversified stock portfolio. Let us hope that the current federal administration will learn a lesson from Katrina and diversify their disaster preparedness efforts from a single focus on terrorism to one that includes meaningful all-hazard disaster preparations.

At some point in the future the eyes of the world will be upon us and the disaster that we will be dealing with, worst case or not. Let us hope that the lessons being learned by the federal government today will change the direction of their preparedness efforts in order to have a more balanced approach to disaster preparedness.